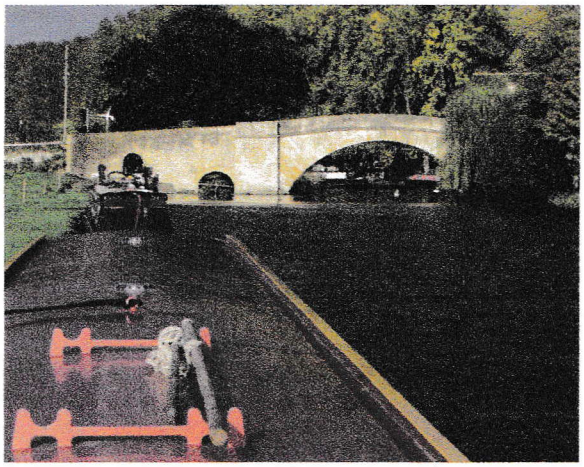
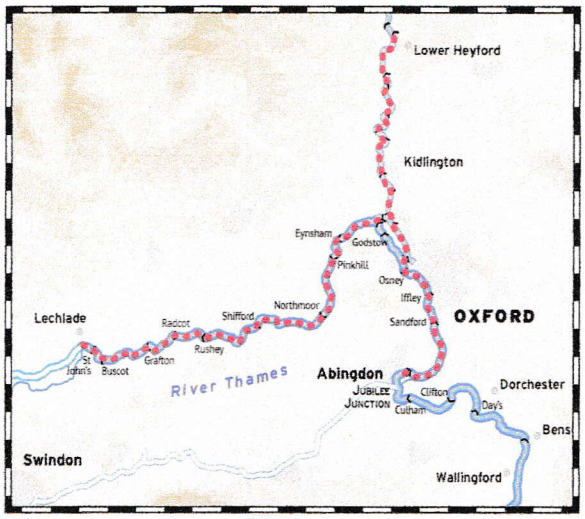
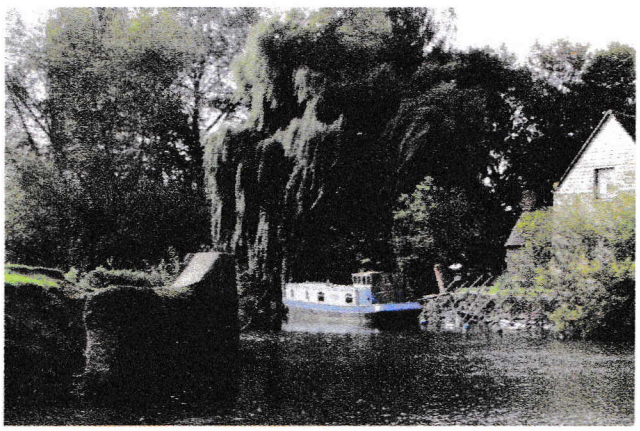


Marooned on the Thames

In spite of an enjoyable week's cruising, **Peter Hills**' hire holiday on the Upper Thames will likely be remembered for one incident – getting stuck on a sandbank



Top left: St John's Lock.
Top right: Moored before Halfpenny Bridge.
Above right: Map of the route.
Right: The Thames, coming in from the left at Inglesham – the limit of navigation for powered craft.



SEVERAL YEARS AGO we hired 60ft narrowboat *Rousham* from Oxfordshire Narrowboats with the intention of exploring the Upper Thames as far as Inglesham. My wife Lindsay and I planned a relaxing week's cruise, with friends joining us at intervals along the way. Yet, in spite of being experienced hirers, the holiday presented us with a few unusual challenges. And almost from the outset too.

Inauspicious start

While carrying our supplies aboard our boat at the hire base at Lower Heyford, we noticed two other craft also being loaded. They were each crewed by half a dozen or so young men who were already drinking and making merry. I guessed they were a stag party.

Setting off on the south Oxford Canal, we tackled Dashwood Lock before deciding to tie up in the countryside at a good spot with a grassy straight section of bank. I moored the boat with a banking clip at the stern and a mooring pin at the bow. We put the kettle on and rummaged around for the doughnuts.

We heard the stags coming before we felt anything. They swished down our port side faster than the *Flying Scotsman* – incredibly close, with the engine roaring. Our boat jolted back, then sideways, and then shot forward. There was an almighty crash from the stern as the banking clip was forced off the trunking and catapulted onto the deck, still attached to its rope. Tea, coffee and doughnuts went flying.

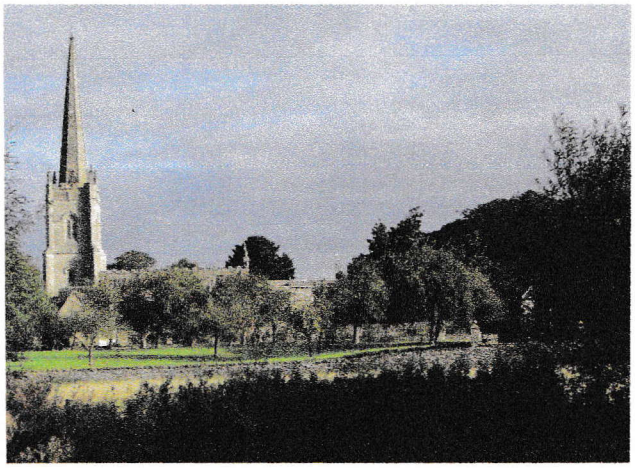
We were rapidly moving forward now, floating completely free. When I got out onto the stern, a passer-by had managed to grab the bow line that had come off its mooring pin and was being dragged along the bank. The stag party was already 200 yards away. I yelled, we got a cheery wave back. The passer-by and I managed to stop the boat and pull it into the side. Then along came stag party number two. Not so close and not so fast, but we took off once more. Only superhuman effort by my new friend and I got us back under control. We all shared the doughnuts.

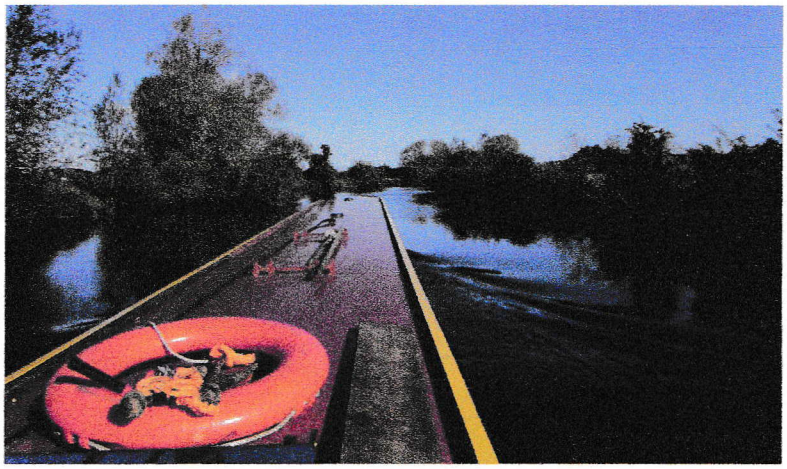
"We were rapidly moving forward now, floating completely free"

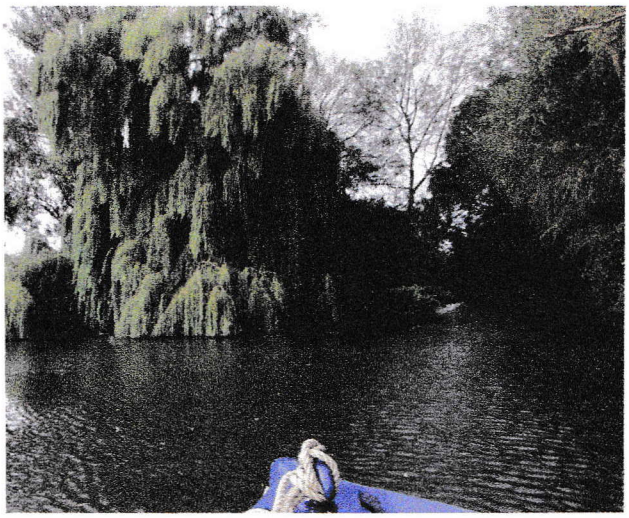
Sandbank strike

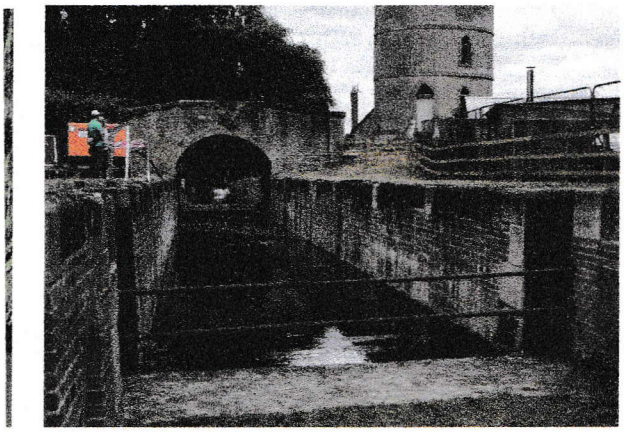
The next morning we headed off after the mandatory eggs and bacon. After Thrupp, progress was slow because of all the moored boats. We were running on tickover most of the time but that didn't stop the locals seeing we were a hire-boat and yelling that we should slow down. I think they meant stop and clear off. We turned right at Duke's Lock so we could take the short cut off the Oxford Canal onto the Thames.

We came onto the river ahead of King's Lock then set off north-west planning to moor at the Ferryman pub that night. At around 4.30pm, with storm clouds brewing and









Above left: St Lawrence Church at Lechlade. **Above:** Passing Bablock Hythe. **Left:** Two rivers at Inglesham. **Below left:** Reconstructed Inglesham Lock is part of the Thames & Severn Canal restoration.

the wind picking up, Eynsham Lock came into view. As I got closer I could just see the lock-keeper and assumed he was preparing the lock for us. I made my usual approach noticing, just within my peripheral vision, the landing stage and what looked like green and red builder's buckets floating in front of it. Suddenly, we stopped dead.

We had hit a sandbank about 300 yards in front of the lock gates. The landing stage was to our left, about 40 yards or so away. An almighty weir was directly to our right, about 600 yards distant. We were marooned.

Stuck fast

I first tried to reverse off but we were stuck fast. The lock-keeper walked to the edge of the landing stage and shouted across to us. "I tried to warn you." He hadn't, or we hadn't noticed.

"I could do with a tow," I yelled back. "Do you know of any cruisers in transit?"

"Huh. You will need something bigger than a cruiser," was the reply. He then said we were not his responsibility and that we should contact the hire company.

So, I phoned the base. By chance, a rep from River Canal Rescue was with the manager but it was now past 5pm and he was going home so he suggested I call the Environment Agency. RCR said nothing they could do until tomorrow and that we should be prepared to stay in the middle of the river overnight. Lindsay and I were horrified.

They did suggest we deploy the anchor. I was not at all happy about this because I knew the chain and warp would be around 30 yards long on a Thames craft. I also knew that weir heights could be adjusted overnight. This might mean we'd start to float in total darkness, potentially crashing into the landing stage or being dragged downstream by the weir current

In order to try to free the boat, we were advised to pump out the bow water tank, so we set about turning on all the freshwater taps in the bathrooms and galley. I tried using the pole to push us sideways; I tried hanging off the side, feet on the gunwale, rocking the boat with the engine in reverse. Nothing worked.

I called the EA emergency number. Without knowing precisely where we were, they decided we were not in any personal danger, or a danger to other boats, so there was nothing they could do. I called the boatyard, only to get an answerphone message citing an out-of-hours emergency number. I called that and got an answerphone. They had all gone home.

No response

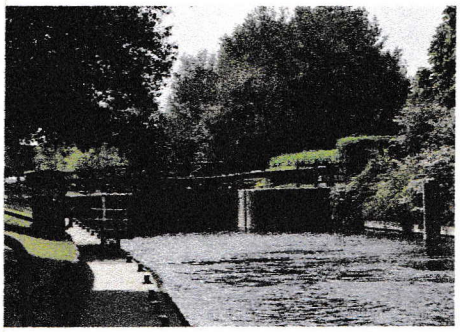
But suddenly, help was at hand. The lock gates opened and a large narrowboat came through and stopped at the landing stage. It was a fellow hire-craft, an Anglo Welsh narrowboat, based at Oxford just beyond the lock. A crew of four emerged and I shouted that we were stuck and would appreciate a tow. They ignored me and would not make eye contact. They tied up and went inside.

After the lock closed, the lock-keeper came over and shouted that he was going off duty. He turned around and merged into the gloom without further ado.

We were completely alone in the middle of the channel, with the weir roaring away to our right. It was now about 6pm and starting to drizzle. I carried on rocking, reversing and pumping for the next half hour or so. Suddenly, two of the narrowboat crew emerged from their boat with a small dog. Without looking at us, they climbed onto the landing stage and headed off a walk. When they came back about 15 minutes later, I shouted over to them – again, no response.

Set free

I began to plan for a night on the river. We had torches and we dug out blankets since I was unsure about having the heating on with an empty water tank. Water was still pouring from all the cold taps and Lindsay had her head in her hands.



Above left: Eynsham Lock. **Above:** Where the Thames meets the Wilts & Berks Canal.

Out of the gloom I saw a small white shape that gradually got bigger. It was a small cruiser coming upstream from Oxford with a crew of two, a couple, the lady standing at the bow. They had sussed our situation immediately. I asked for a tow, they happily agreed and I threw over our stern line. The lady tied our line to their bow T-stud and the captain gently reversed to take up the slack. It was not a large boat – maybe a 20ft-long wide-beam – but with the lightest of touches, we were off and free. So much for needing a 15-ton narrowboat as a tractor.

We thanked the couple profusely and moored up at the landing stage ahead of our not-so-helpful fellow hirers.

Race to Lechlade

Due to this setback, we had to make up two hours on the river the following day, to keep a date with friends in Lechlade. We were up early, replenishing our water supply at the hose on the far side of the lock.

Our first port of call was Pinkhill Lock, where I bought a Thames licence. I took the opportunity to ask the lock-keeper why the downstream side of Eynsham Lock had not been dredged. He said the Environment Agency has no money and no longer undertakes dredging above Oxford. He also told me that the sandbank had been created by severe storms some years earlier. Many boats had become grounded since then, so I wasn't to take it too personally.

It took us two hours to reach Bablock Hythe, a delightful spot where we had planned to moor the previous night. After Shifford Lock the river narrows and the meanders begin to kick in. There seemed to be an endless succession of hairpin bends that actually fold back within themselves, creating an illusion of going round and round in circles.

We have always found Pearson's the best guides for inland cruising but an error in the timing between the Rose Revived pub and Tadpole Bridge added an hour to an already fraught day. Our attempt to make up time was not helped by many of the locks being unmanned and set against us. How our spirits were lifted when we saw a boat emerging from a lock, allowing me to drop Lindsay off on the landing stage and head straight in.

The meanders returned in earnest between Tenfoot Bridge and Radcot Lock, and we had lunch on the fly. It became windy with a misty rain. Around 6pm we reached St John's Lock and we could see the church spire at Lechlade in the distance. On a sunny day this would be a beautiful spot but we hardly noticed. We were wet and tired after over ten hours of cruising.

An hour later, we moored just before Halfpenny Bridge. We didn't have the energy to cook on board that night, so we set off along the field towards the town centre, where we enjoyed fish and chips at Monica's Plaice.

Turning point

Our friends Steve and Sandra joined us early the following morning and we continued our journey west to Inglesham. We all agreed it is a beautiful spot, with mature willow trees dangling their fronds into the crystal clear water.

Visible behind the warehouse at Inglesham Wharf is a round house, one of five such structures on the now unnavigable Thames & Severn Canal, which met the river here. The Cotswolds Canals Trust is working hard to return boats to its water and has already restored Inglesham Lock.

Retracing our steps to Oxford, Steve took the helm and steered the boat for the rest of the day and I was happy about that. Sandra and Lindsay mostly stayed at the bow, chatting and taking pictures. With the wind behind us and now heading downstream, *Rousham* moved easily through the deep water.

Our destination that day was the Rose Revived pub at Newbridge, where Steve and Sandra had left their car. We arrived at 6pm but instead of moorings we found a very high bank at the end of the beer garden, a gigantic willow tree shrouding the entire riverside and fallen masonry that prevented us getting close to the bank. After some complex manoeuvring, we managed to find space beneath the willow tree but the bank was level with *Rousham*'s roof, so our gangplank ended up at substantial angle. While we enjoyed a fine evening meal at the pub before saying goodbye to our friends, getting back aboard the boat did prove a little hairy in the dark.

Onto Abingdon

The next morning we breakfasted at the Rose Revived pub before two new crew members, Robert and Virginia, joined us at 10am. Although Robert has decades of boating experience, this was the first time he had steered a craft of *Rousham*'s length and weight by tiller. He took to it like a duck to water, and assumed the role of captain for most of the day.

At Eynsham Lock, the lock-keeper who did so little to help us was not on duty. Passing through without difficulty and avoiding the sandbank, we cruised onto Godstow Lock, where we stopped for lunch.

After a thoroughly pleasant afternoon's cruising though all of Oxford's many sights, it was nearly dark by the time we found a spot to moor at Abingdon. Lights twinkled all over the town and along the bridge, and we decamped to a nearby restaurant to enjoy another delicious meal before saying our farewells.

In the morning, Linday and I took the boat downstream a little, past the old entrance to the Wilts & Berks Canal and along Abingdon's inspiring waterfront. We then retraced our steps back to Oxford, turned right onto the Sheepwash Channel and continued on the south Oxford Canal. After overnighting at Thrupp, we returned to Lower Heyford the following day – a gentle end to a truly memorable holiday.

Below: Abingdon waterfront.

"They said we should be prepared to stay in the middle of the river overnight"

This feature is an extract from a chapter in Peter Hills' personal memoir *Horses Narrowboats Rabbits and a Feral Cat*. The book details his 15 years of hire-boating and is published by New Generation Publishing. It was reviewed in the May issue of *WW*.